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ABSTRACT

The controversy over minimum competency assessment has special implications for the handicapped, since federal law requires that handicapped students must be afforded equal educational opportunities. Problems will arise in establishing criteria of competence and in administering minimum competency programs for students with learning disabilities. One method for delineating the testing methods and for clarifying exemptions from testing for handicapped children is the use of individualized education programs (IEP). A survey of the minimum competency regulations in 26 states showed that twelve made reference to IEP and how it was to be employed. Discussion of the application of IEP within the minimum competency movement considered: (1) competencies the students are to attain proficiency in: (2) the level of proficiency to be expected: and (3) specifications of any alternative instructional/testing strategies. Competencies that the students are not expected to attain should also be outlined. (FG)

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THE ROLE OF THE IEP IN THE MINIMUM COMPETENCY MOVEMENT

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Minimum competency assessment stems from an outcry by a society disillusioned and shocked by the overall deficiency in basic skills exhibited by recent high school graduates. Predicated upon the belief that evaluation determines the degree of mastery achieved by a student after completion of a prescribed course of study, minimum competency assessment is designed to measure the extent to which a student possesses and employs those skills identified as being prerequisite for members of society.

Failure to meet criterion on a minimum assessment instrument at the exit level of one's educational career might result in one of three probable outcomes: (1) prevention of graduation, (2) the awarding of a certificate of attendance only, or (3) the awarding of a diploma minus a proficiency statement. However, many states employ minimum competency assessment at predetermined intervals during an individual's academic life. Failure to demonstrate mastery at any one level results in remediation of those deficit skills. It is not too difficult, as Cawley (1978) has indicated, to arrive at the conclusion that one general outcome of the education endeavor ought to be an individual who can efficiently and reliably use the knowledge and skills acquired in school to basic life experiences.

With regard to the minimum competency movement, recent literature has dealt with the topic of the handicapped and whether or not they should be included in the programs. It goes without saying that if minimum competency is thought necessary for minimal participation in life for the nonhandicapped, it must have equivalent implications for the handicapped. Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and P. L. 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act) stipulate that the handicapped student must be afforded equal educational opportunities.

Articles specific to administrative problems inherent in the inclusion of the handicapped in the minimum competency movement have been rampant in the literature (Safer, 1980: Gallagher & Hall, 1979; Hinesley, 1979: Kaluzny, 1979; Danielson, 1978; Fenton, 1978; Kennedy, 1978; Morrissey, 1978). Recently, articles dealing with the role of the IEP have surfaced, However, to date, no comprehensive investigation of state requirements as they pertain to the IEP in the minimum competency movement has been reported.

METHOD

Sample Population

Copies of state regulations regarding the minimum competency movement were requested of state education officials in charge of minimum competency development. A total of 26 states sent copies of their minimum competency regulations. Two (2) states were in the process of developing requirements; eight (8) states indicated that the decision to participate in the minimum competency movement was left to the discretion of the local education agencies. Thus, these states had no general requirements. Fourteen (14) states indicated that they were not participating in the minimum competency movement.

Procedure

State regulations of the 26 states with minimum competency programs were examined for utilization of the IEP as a vehicle for specification of minimum competency instruction and assessment procedures. To ensure consistency in the examination of the IEP component, interrater reliability between two examiners was determined. Interrater reliability based on a random sampling of five state regulations was 1.00.

Results

Of the 26 state regulations examined, 12 made reference to the IEP and how it is to be employed. Data relative to this area is depicted in Table 1. Basically, the IEP serves as the vehicle through which (1) testing modifications

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Table 1 about here

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are delineated and (2) exemptions from testing are stipulated.

Discussion

It the handicapped are to be included in the minimum competency movement, the IEP must be utilized as the vehicle which connects minimum competencies with instruction and assessment. The IEP should delineate (1) competencies the student is to attain proficiency in, (2) the level of proficiency to be expected and (3) specifications of any alternative instructional/testing strategies. Reference to those competencies the student is not expected to attain, and why, should also be contained in the IEP.

Competencies

The IEP contains both short-term instructional objectives and long-term goals. Competencies can be considered as those behaviors, that the learner must demonstrate in a given area, such as reading or math. The general area in which specific competencies are to be attained relate to the long-term goals of the IEP. The specific competencies within a given area are identical to the short-term instructional objectives.

The responsibility of the team developing the IEP is to identify those minimum competencies judged to be within the ability level of the student.

Table [1]

Utilization of IEP's in Relationship to Minimum Competency

States	Provision
California	must state if differential standards are to be employed
Delaware	must include goals, objectives and evaluative criteria including differential assessment procedures
Hawaii	indicates if student is to receive a diploma or certificate
Kentucky	indicates skill level of student in order that a proper match of test level can occur
Louisiana	decision for inclusion based on IEP
Massachusetts	must state if student is to be included
Missouri	indicates special testing procedures/exemption
New Jersey	must state if student is to be exempted from evaluation for minimum standards
New York	must consistently reflect use of alternate testing procedures and for EMH/TMH completion of an appropriate IEP leads to awarding of a certificate
North Carolina	must state if student is exempt from taking competency test
Tennessee	must state if student is to be exempted from evaluation
Vermont	must reflect multi-year plan, successful completion results in awarding of a diploma

One aspect of including minimum competencies in the IEP revolves around the issue of content or behavior. Content can be described as the actual grade level (1st . . . 12th) and the specific area covered (science, history, etc.) Behavior can be described as the task within the content that must be performed by the student. For instance, applying word attack skills to unknown words is the behavior that may be applied to reading at sixth grade reading level. To take the idea one more step, word attack skills in reading at the sixth grade level may be applied in science, geography, math, etc. The bottom line is that grade level content is superimposed upon the competencies set forth in the IEP. The IEP that addresses itself to the behavioral needs of the learner rather than the content needs will allow educators to superimpose the correct level of content depending upon the needs of the handicapped learner.

Proficiency Level

Once the specific competencies have been delineated, the level of proficiency expected of the student must be set forth. A 15 year old handicapped learner who is expected to obtain the minimum competency of reading a passage and describing the main idea may only be able to do so at the fourth grade reading level. That is, a handicapped learner should only demonstrate proficiency in a competency at a level commensurate with his/her ability.

Alternative Instructional/Testing Strategies

For the student exhibiting a specific learning problem, adjustments in the instructional and testing strategies must be made. A student with a severe written expressive language problem, but with intact verbal expressive language skills should require modification in the method by which he/she is taught and tested. For instance, if the competency to be attained is "writing letters," this student should be assessed verbally--that is, the student would "speak" his/her letter to the instructor.

The IEP is the vehicle through which "specially designed instruction" is afforded to the handicapped learner. With the current emphasis on minimum competencies the IEP can serve as the vehicle that is the guide for the attainment of basic skills for the handicapped. In order to succeed in society, the handicapped must be proficient in those minimum skills required of the nonhandicapped. The IEP is the tool to aid in the development of these skills.

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